DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 253 114 FL 014 868

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TITLE Don't Put Your Leg in Your Mouth: Transfer in the Acquisition of Idioms in a Second Language.
PUB DATE 13 Oct 84
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Boston University Conference on Language Development (9th, Boston, MA, October 12-14, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *English (Second Language); *Error Patterns; Higher Education; *Idioms; *Interference (Language); Language Usage; *Second Language Learning; Spanish; Spanish Speaking; *Transfer of Training

ABSTRACT

A study of transfer of native language training and/or interference in learning English idioms had as its subjects 12 Venezuelan students in an American university who were advanced learners of English as a second language. Fifteen equivalent and commonly used English and Spanish idioms were used in tests of recognition, comprehension, recall, and production. Statistical analysis of the results indicates that the subjects were able to generalize from the idiom's meaning in Spanish to its meaning in English, even when the form was slightly different, and they could correctly produce many more identical idioms than idioms of other types. Both of these results indicate use of positive transfer. Interference (negative transfer) occurred on the two production tests, more for similar than totally different idioms. These results support the notion that advanced second language learners whose first language is closely related to the second can use knowledge of idioms in their first language to comprehend and produce idioms in the second. In addition, the subjects used target-language-related strategies such as mixing idioms and providing an incomplete idiom. It is suggested that language similarities may encourage interference, and that idioms are not always considered nontransferable. Further research is recommended. (MSE)

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ED253114

Suzanne Irujo
Boston U. Conference
on Language Development
October 13, 1984

DON'T PUT YOUR LEG IN YOUR MOUTH:
TRANSFER IN THE ACQUISITION OF IDIOMS IN A SECOND LANGUAGE

What happens when language learners try to use idioms? Do they generalize from other idioms which they have heard in their second language? Or do they use their knowledge of idioms in their first language and attempt to transfer that knowledge? If they do use tranfer, can this strategy be successful and produce a correct idiom in the second language (i.e., positive transfer)? Under what conditions does this strategy produce the most interference (i.e., negative transfer)?

The concept of transfer is based on the idea that previous learning affects subsequent learning. During the 1950's and 1960's it was assumed that interlingual transfer was the most important factor in learning another language (Politzer 1965). The shift to generative grammar brought with it less emphasis on interference and more emphasis on developmental processes, learning strategies, and the structure of the target language as sources of error (Richards 1974). Transfer did not go away, however, and recent investigations have focused on the question of what is transferred, what the domains of language transfer are, and whether transfer can be predicted (see the collection of studies in Gass and Selinker 1983).

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The literature on transfer is linked with the literature on contrastive analysis. The "strong" version of the contrastive analysis hypothesis claimed to be able to predict areas of difficulty by comparing the native language of the student with the target language (Lado 1957). Similar patterns would be easy to learn because they could be successfully transferred from the first language. Different patterns would cause interference and therefore be difficult to learn. Stockwell, Bowen and Martin's (1965) hierarchy of difficulty proposed that the more different two items were, the more difficult they would be.

Contrastive analysis was criticized on theoretical grounds (Whitman 1970, Sajavaara 1976) and because its predictions were not borne out empirically (Briere 1968, Buteau 1970, Tran-Thi-Chau 1975). Attempts were made to modify the contrastive analysis hypothesis to make it more viable. Wardhaugh (1970) proposed a weak version which explained errors after the fact rather than predicting them before they were made. Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970) suggested a moderate version, which proposed that more difficulty would occur when the differences between languages were slight rather than large.

Very little work has been done on transfer in the acquisition of idioms. Two studies done in the Netherlands tested whether structures such as idioms, proverbs and slang, which were called language-specific, are considered by learners to be non-transferable. Both Jordens (1977) and Kellerman (1977) asked second language learners to judge the grammaticality of correct and incorrect sentences containing idioms. Some of the

idioms had first-language equivalents and some did not. In both studies, learners tended to judge those idioms which had first-language equivalents as ungrammatical, indicating a reluctance to transfer language-specific items.

These studies, however, deal only with grammaticality judgments, not with comprehension and production of idioms, nor do they differentiate idioms according to their degree of similarity to first language idioms. The present study was designed to assess the differential effects of transfer on the comprehension and production of three types of idioms: those which are identical in two languages, those which are very similar but differ in a small way, and those which are totally different, but still have the same meaning. In trying to predict the effects of transfer on these three types of idioms, the strong version of contrastive analysis predicts that different idioms would cause the most interference; the moderate version predicts that similar idioms would cause the most interference; and the weak version does not make predictions, since it attempts only to account for errors after they occur. The strong version has not been empirically supported, whereas Oller and Ziahosseiny's moderate version is supported by evidence from their study, and it also takes into account the human tendency to overgeneralize and overlook minimal differences.

It was therefore hypothesized that similar idioms would show more interference than different idioms on tests of production. On tests of comprehension, positive transfer would affect identical and similar idioms equally, and both would be

comprehended much better than different idioms. (The complete hypotheses of the study are listed on your hand-out.)

Subjects for the study were twelve advanced learners of English from Venezuela. All were regularly enrolled students at a major university, selected at random from a list of all Venezuelan students at the university. All had scored at least 500 on the TOEFL, with a mean TOEFL score of 570. Average length of residence in the United States was 2.75 years, and average age was 21.8 years.

The idioms chosen for the study were selected on the basis of questionnaires completed by native speakers of English and Spanish, who were asked to define the idiom and rate its degree of common use. Fifteen idioms of each type were chosen; all had been defined unambiguously by all of the respondents, had equivalent definitions in both languages, and had received a median of at least 3 on the 1 to 5 frequency of use scale. Tests were written to assess recognition, comprehension, recall and production of these idioms. The recognition test was a multiple choice test, with the choices including the correct paraphrase of the idiom, a sentence related to the correct paraphrase, a sentence related to the literal interpretation, and an unrelated sentence. The comprehension test asked the subjects to write a definition of the idiom in either English or Spanish. The recall test was a discourse completion task consisting of a paragraph containing the idiom with one word missing; subjects had to supply the missing word. The production test was a translation task, although the subjects were not told that they were to

translate the idiom. It consisted of a paragraph in Spanish containing the idiom, and an English translation of the paragraph with the idiom omitted. Subjects were asked to supply the English idiom which they would use in that situation. Examples of all three types of idioms were given in the instructions, so subjects would realize that a literal translation was not always possible.

Subjects were tested individually or in small groups, with the tests given in the following order: discourse-completion, translation, definition, multiple choice.

The items on the two comprehension tests were scored as correct or incorrect, and the items on the production tests were scored as correct, incorrect, or incorrect with interference. It was often difficult to determine when interference had occurred. For the purposes of this study, interference was defined as the translation of a content word from a Spanish idiom used incorrectly in an English idiom. However, there were many cases, especially in similar idioms, where an incorrect word in the English idiom could be either a translation from the Spanish idiom or an overgeneralization of a word in the English idiom. An example of this is provided by the title of this paper; is "put your leg in your mouth" interference from the similar equivalent Spanish idiom meter la pata ("to put in the leg"), or is it an overgeneralization from English "foot"? In cases of doubt, the error was not considered as interference. In order to check the reliability of the scoring, four graduate students were asked to score one of the translation tests which contained a

large number of errors; inter-rater reliability among the researcher and the four independent raters was .87.

The analysis of the data was done by one-way analyses of variance with repeated measures, which were used to test for differences among the three types of idioms on total number of idioms correct. Where there were significant differences, Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference test was used to see which type of idiom had significantly higher or lower scores than the others. To test for differences in interference scores, analysis of variance could not be used because the mean scores for identical idioms were zero. Therefore, paired *t* tests were used to test for differences between similar and different idioms on number of interference errors. In addition, a non-statistical analysis of the types of responses used on the translation test was done to investigate what strategies the subjects were using to produce unknown idioms.

The results are summarized on this graph, which shows the mean number of idioms correct and the mean number of interference errors. Tables 1, 2 and 3 in your handout give the means for both these categories, plus the results of the statistical tests. Table 1 shows that for all four tests, the mean number of idioms correct differs significantly depending on the type of idiom. Table 2 shows exactly where those differences are; for the multiple choice and definitions tests, different idioms have a significantly lower score; for the translation test, identical idioms are significantly higher; and for the discourse completion test, all three types of idioms are different. Table 3 shows the

results of the paired *t* tests on the interference scores; there are significantly more interference errors for similar idioms than for different idioms.

In interpreting these results, it appears that on the two comprehension tests, subjects were able to generalize from the meaning of the idiom in Spanish to its meaning in English, even when the form was slightly different. On the two production tests, they were able to correctly produce many more identical idioms than idioms of the other two types. Both of these results provide an indication that positive transfer is being used. Negative transfer (interference) is also evident on the two production tests, and there is more of it for similar idioms than for totally different idioms. When differences are slight, the tendency of the human mind is to generalize and ignore those differences. When the differences are so great that two forms have nothing in common, there is no reason to try to use one form in order to produce the other, so little transfer occurs.

The hypotheses of the study were supported. Subjects comprehended identical idioms as well as similar idioms, and both were comprehended better than different idioms; they produced more identical idioms than similar or different idioms (Hypothesis 1). Similar idioms were comprehended as well as identical idioms, but production of similar idioms showed interference from the first language (Hypothesis 2). Fewer different idioms were comprehended and produced (although the difference between similar and different idioms was not significant on the translation test), and there was little

evidence of interference on different idioms (Hypothesis 3).

The results of this study support the notion that advanced learners of a second language whose first language is closely related to the second can use their knowledge of idioms in their first language to comprehend and produce idioms in the second. This result differs from Jordens (1977) and Kellerman (1977), who found that learners considered idioms to be non-transferable, but it does not really contradict them because of the different tasks involved. In addition, there is support for the notion that structures which are very similar in the first and second languages will produce more interference than structures which are different. This supports the moderate contrastive analysis hypothesis of Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970).

While the results of this study show that subjects do use their native language to comprehend and produce idioms in their second language, they also used target-language related strategies. It is impossible to make any definitive statements about the relative influence of first- and second-language strategies, however, because of the difficulty of assigning responses to a specific category. For example, is "I am filled up" a confusion of "filled" and "fed" (I am fed up was the expected English idiom), or is it interference from the different but equivalent Spanish idiom estoy hasta la coronilla ("I am up to the top of my head"; being up to the top of your head means that you are filled up)? There were some fairly clear clases of target-language overgeneralization, however, such as "come low or high water"; "kill two birds with one rock"; swallow it hook,

cord and sinker"; and "hit the nail on the tip." In other cases, the overgeneralization came from a different English idiom: "put something fast on her," where to pull a fast one is confused with to put something over on her; "kicked the towel," where to throw in the towel is confused with to kick the bucket.

Other target-language related strategies included providing an incomplete idiom ("cost an arm" for cost an arm and a leg), using a different English idiom than the expected one, either an acceptable equivalent ("I've had it" for I'm fed up) or an unacceptable non-equivalent ("play all my cards" for put my cards on the table), using a figurative expression which is not a known idiom ("a nail in the back yard" for a needle in a haystack), or using a literal expression ("what's wrong with her?" for what's bugging/eating her?).

An interesting first-language strategy was used by several subjects who thought of another Spanish idiom which was equivalent to the one given, and translated that one. For example, "it was by the clouds" (a direct translation of estaba por las nubes, which means that something cost a lot) was given for costo un ojo de la cara ("it cost an eye of the face"), when the expected equivalent was it cost an arm and a leg.

This study has theoretical implications for the investigation of transfer in the acquisition of a second language. The results provide some indication that similarities between languages encourage interference, and that idioms are not always considered non-transferable. It must be remembered,

however, that the results apply only to the specific subjects and tasks of this study. Further research is needed to see what the results would be with subjects from other language-culture groups. In addition, it is possible that subjects would avoid using idioms if they had a choice of using an English idiom or not.

Finally, applications of this study can be made to the teaching of idioms in ESL and foreign language classes. Based on this research, recommendations can be made about ways to utilize positive transfer and avoid interference in learning idioms in a second language.

Suzanne Irujo
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October 13, 1984

DON'T PUT YOUR LEG IN YOUR MOUTH:

TRANSFER IN THE ACQUISITION OF IDIOMS IN A SECOND LANGUAGE

Problem: Do advanced learners of ESL whose native language is related to English use their knowledge of their first language to comprehend and produce idioms in English? If so, when does this result in positive transfer and when does it result in interference?

Subjects: 12 Venezuelan college students, mean age 21.8 years, mean residence in U.S. 2.75 years, mean TOEFL score 57#.

Materials: 45 idioms were tested: a) 15 identical in Spanish and English; b) 15 very similar but slightly different; c) 15 totally different in form but with equivalent meanings. Four tests were given: a) a multiple choice test for recognition; b) a definitions test for comprehension; c) a discourse completion test for recall; d) a transiation test for production.

Hypotheses: 1) Subjects would show evidence of positive transfer with identical idioms; they would recognize and understand more identical idioms than different idioms, and they would correctly recall and produce more identical idioms than similar or different idioms. 2) Subjects would show evidence of negative transfer with similar idioms; recognition and understanding might be almost as high as for identical idioms, but correct recall and production would show interference from the first language. 3) There would be no evidence of either positive or negative transfer with different idioms; subjects would recognize, comprehend, recall and produce fewer different idioms than the other two types, because there is no positive transfer to help, but recall and production would not show interference from the first language.

Results: See Tables 1, 2 and 3.

EXAMPLES OF TYPES OF IDIOMS

Identical:

She wears the pants. / Ella lleva los pantalones.
("She wears the pants.")

Similar:

My better half. / Mi media naranja.
("My half orange.")

Different:

He's a wet blanket. / Es un aguafiestas.
("He's a party-waterer.")

EXAMPLES OF TEST ITEMS

Multiple Choice:

I'm fed up with him.
a. I'm very happy with him.
b. I'm very tired of him.
c. I'm full from eating too much.
d. I'm crazy about him.

Definition:

He's fed up with me. _____

_____

Discourse Completion:

Tim's parents were tired of hearing loud rock music all the time. "Turn that music down," his mother yelled. "I'm _____ up with your loud music!"

Translation:

Los dos hermanos siempre se peleaban. Por fin su madre no podia mas, y les gritó, "!Basta ya! !Estoy hasta la coronilla de estas peleas!"

The two brothers were always fighting. Finally their mother couldn't take any more, and she shouted, "Enough! _____ with these fights!"

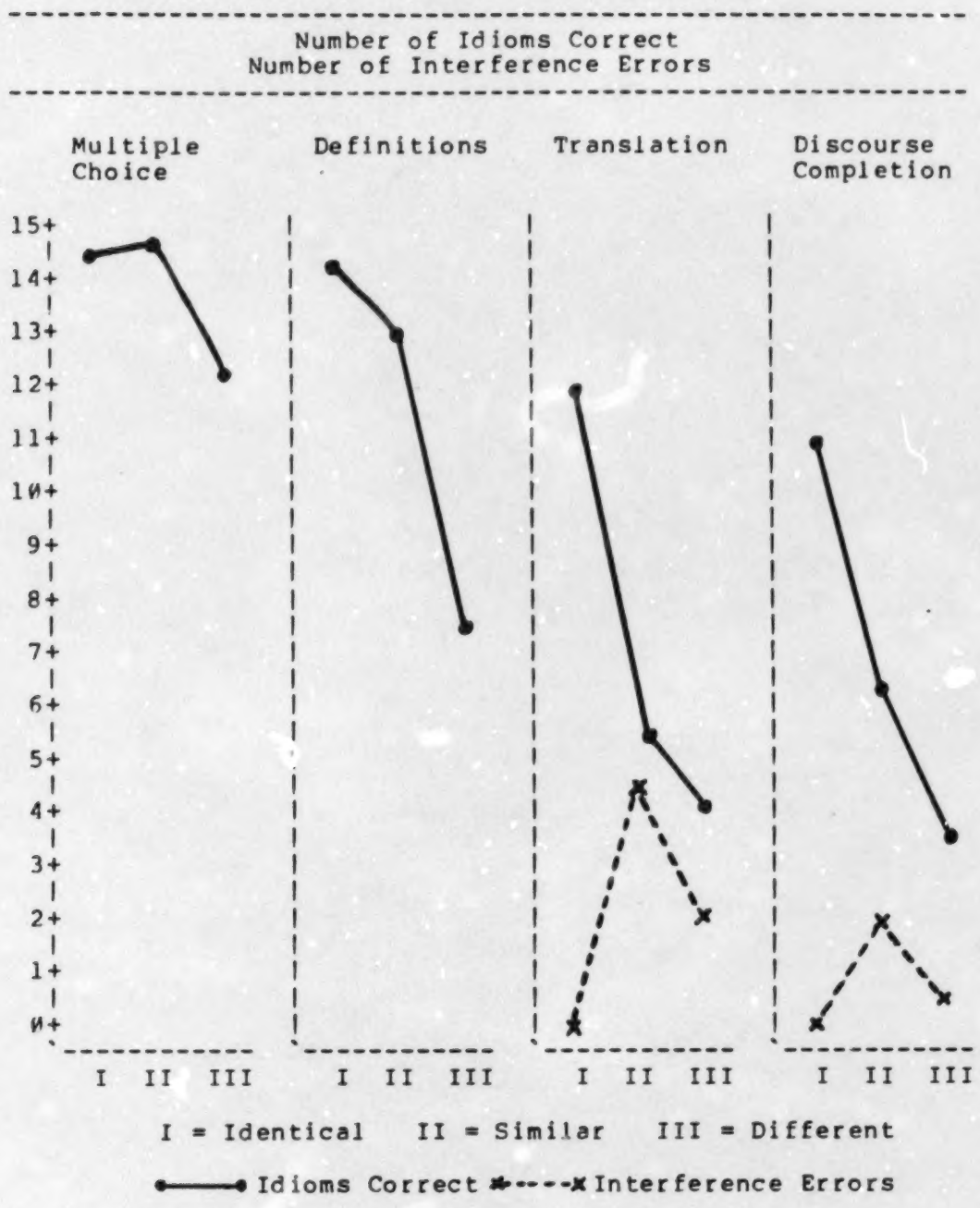
Number of Idioms Correct
Number of Interference Errors
Multiple Choice
Definitions
Translation
Discourse Completion
15+
14+
13+
12+
11+
10+
9+
8+
7+
6+
5+
4+
3+
2+
1+
0+
I II III
I II III
I II III
I II III
I = Identical II = Similar III = Different
Idioms Correct
Interference Errors

TABLE 1

Means and F Scores for Number of Idioms Correct
(Standard Deviations in Parentheses)

	Multiple Choice	Definitions	Translation	Discourse Completion
Identical	14.58 (0.79)	14.25 (0.97)	11.92 (2.28)	10.92 (1.88)
Similar	14.67 (0.65)	13.00 (1.65)	5.33 (2.81)	6.25 (3.05)
Different	12.25 (2.01)	7.58 (2.61)	4.08 (2.15)	3.58 (2.45)
F (2,22)	15.45**	61.46**	80.23**	45.47**

n = 12 ** p < .001

TABLE 2

Differences Among Means of Types of Idioms
(Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference)

		II	III
Multiple choice	I	0.09	2.42*
	II		2.33*
		II	III
Definitions	I	1.25	6.67*
	II		5.42*
		II	III
Translation	I	6.59*	7.84*
	II		1.25
Discourse completion	I	4.67*	7.34*
	II		2.67*

$n = 12$ * $p < .01$

I = Identical II = Similar III = Different

TABLE 3

Means and t Scores for Number of Interference Errors
(Standard Deviations in Parentheses)

	Translation	Discourse Completion
Identical	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Similar	4.58 (1.51)	1.92 (1.44)
Different	1.92 (1.62)	0.42 (0.67)
t (df=22)	5.53**	3.58**

n = 12 ** p < .001

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